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ABSTRACT

This study explored the meaning of motherhood among Navajo teenagers, their mothers, and community informants living in a small, rural town on a Navajo Reservation. Participating were 8 Navajo teenage mothers ranging from 16 to 19 years, 7 grandmothers (mothers of the teens) who ranged from 41 to 57 years, and 6 community informants: two teachers, a nurse, a substance abuse counselor, a Delegate to the Navajo Nation, and a Navajo healer. Three of these informants were white, non-Native Americans who had extensive experience working with Native Americans, and three were Navajos who had been raised in the community. Intensive semi-structured interviews of participants were conducted in English, tape recorded, and transcribed. Results revealed marked diversity among the teenagers in the extent of identification with adolescence and maternity. Four groups of teenage mothers were identified: (1) those with high commitment to both roles; (2) those with high commitment to adolescent, with little commitment to maternity; (3) those with single, focused commitment to motherhood; and (4) those lacking commitment to either role. Grandmother reports confirmed the categorization of each teen. Reports from teens, grandmothers, and informants agreed that adolescent parenting was no longer condoned in the Navajo society, probably due to increased parenting occurring outside of marriage and the increased importance of educational attainment. However, most families accepted the unplanned pregnancies and supported their daughters. Navajo culture was described as being in transition between traditional values and an emerging blending of Navajo and Anglo cultures. (Contains 16 references.) (KB)

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Teenager-, Mother-, Daughter-, Who Am I?

Navajo Adolescent Mothers' Perceptions of the Maternal Role

& Implications for Child Developmental Outcomes

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is typically characterized as a period of substantial change across the cognitive, biological, and social spheres (Sternberg, 1985). However, despite the breadth and rapidity of change, adolescence is characteristically also a time of identity consolidation during which individuals begin developing an integrated sense of self (Damon & Hart, 1988; Fischer, 1980) with increasing commitment to specific roles (Blasi, 1988; Marcia, 1980). To this end, development of an integrated definition of self is a major task of the adolescent period (Erikson, 1968).

With increasing age, adolescents in the United States typically assume roles and responsibilities in preparation for adulthood. One such role, often assumed early relative to prominent American expectations, is that of "mother." Rates of adolescent parenting are reportedly higher in the United States than in any other industrialized nation (Brooks-Gunn & Chase-Lansdale, 1995), however, Zelnik & Kantner (1980) assert that most teenage pregnancies are unintended. Parenthood, argues LeMasters (1970), is perhaps the most central and complex of adult social roles in contemporary society; it comprises one of the most central and complex adult social roles in contemporary society, the transition to which "...leads to a sense of crisis and imperative unlike any other adult role transition" (Cohler & Musick, 1996, p.203). For adolescent mothers, whose pregnancies are often unplanned and who are simultaneously grappling with issues of identity consolidation (Marcia, 1980; Erikson, 1968), the transition may evoke an even greater sense of crisis and uncertainty. How one perceives oneself in the maternal role, and the attendant behaviors associated with such, may have direct implications for child outcomes (Barratt, 1991). Given that cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional delays have been

documented in some children born to teenagers (Borkowski et al., 1992), the importance of examining teenagers' perceptions of their role as "mother" may be of practical significance.

Despite high rates of adolescent parenting on the Navajo Reservation, no investigations looking at this population could be located. Moreover, a gap exists in the literature regarding the meaning of maternity, from mothers' subjective points of view, and divorced from idealized perceptions (Woollett & Phoenix, 1991). This investigation was designed to explore the meaning of motherhood among Navajo teenagers, and to complement youth perceptions of their fulfillment of the maternal role with views from their own mothers and community informants.

METHOD

Sample

Twenty-one individuals comprised the final sample, which included eight Navajo adolescent mothers (see Table 1). When interviewed, the adolescent mothers ranged in age from 16 to 19 years (mean 16.8 years); age of first giving birth ranged from 14 to 16 years (mean 15.6 years). Four of the adolescents had one child only, 2 were pregnant with a second child, one adolescent was the mother of two children, and one was the mother of a toddler and two step-children (ages 6 and 8). Seven adolescents reported that their pregnancies were unplanned. Six participated in an alternative education program and the remaining two of the teens attended regular high school. One of the eight teens was employed part-time, the others participated in various extra-curricular activities (e.g., manager of football team). Six teens lived with their families of origin, one lived with extended family and another with her partner. An average of seven persons resided in each household and the average annual household income was less than $20,000. Most (n=7) reported long-term relationships with their partners and some (n=3)

experienced abuse by their partners. Male partners ranged from 17 to 36 years (mean=21.4) and only 3 provided monetary assistance to the teenage mothers or their children.

Seven women comprised the grandmother group (see Table 2); these women are the grandmothers of the teenagers' children. Grandmothers ranged in age from 41 to 57 years (mean 44.9 years). Six of the grandmothers were divorced or separated and one was a widow. All grandmothers reported marrying for the first time between ages 19 and 23 and having their first child between ages 20 and 24.

The third group of participants (see Table 3) included six persons and represented diverse roles and occupations within the community. This group was comprised of two teachers from the alternative high school, a high school nurse, a drug and alcohol abuse counselor, a Delegate to the Navajo Nation (a position equivalent to that of a city mayor), and a traditional Navajo Medicine Man, or healer. Three of the informants were white, non-Native American who had lived in the Navajo community from 2 to 4 years, and had extensive experience working with Native Americans prior to moving to the community. The other three informants were Navajos who had been born and raised in the community.

Procedure

Intensive interviews were conducted with participants residing in a small, rural town located in the heart of the Navajo Reservation. All interviews were conducted in English and all participants were interviewed in private to ensure confidentiality. Interviews were *semi-structured*. Questions related to issues of interest were predetermined, although the sequence of questioning varied, as did the amount of time spent discussing each topic. Questions were open-ended to allow full expression of the participants' attitudes and opinions. Interviews varied from

50 to 110 minutes (mean 75 minutes) and were tape-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Teenagers and their mothers were compensated monetarily for their time. Phenomenological Descriptive Analysis (Colaizzi, 1978) was the technique used for data analysis.

Interviews with the teenagers focused on their perceptions of themselves as mothers, the meaning of children in their lives, and the joys and challenges associated with maternity. They were also asked to discuss their perceptions regarding the desirable timing of first-time parenting, their reactions upon learning they were pregnant, and their mothers' and other family members' reactions to their pregnancies.

Interviews with grandmothers focused on their perceptions of their daughters in the maternal role and to describe their plans and goals for their daughters, and to indicate if those had changed due to their daughters' maternal status. Grandmothers also described their reactions to their daughters' pregnancies and shared their attitudes regarding teenage parenting, particularly in the absence of marriage. Grandmothers provided additional information with regard to past and current attitudes about teenage parenting.

Community informants also described their perceptions with reference to: the impact of teenage maternity on young women and their families; educational and occupational opportunities available to teenagers throughout the community; community-wide perceptions of teenage parenting; and (4) resources available to assist teenage mothers and their families.

RESULTS

Results indicated marked diversity among the teenagers, particularly in relation to their expressed degree of identification with a) adolescence, and/or b) maternity. **Commitment to the maternal role** represents the degree to which a young woman integrates the role of motherhood

into her overall identity. It is evident in how she conceives her role vis á vis her child, including the responsibilities she assumes toward childrearing and caretaking functions, what she perceives her child needs from her, and her behaviors toward meeting those needs. **Commitment to the adolescent role** is conceptualized as the degree to which a young woman is concerned with such issues as maintaining peer relationships, "fitting in" with one's peer group and maintaining involvement in typical adolescent activities such as extra-curricular events. As evident in Table 4, analysis resulted in the discovery of four diverse groups of teenage mothers. **Category 1** consisted of those teenagers who were perceived as having a high degree of identification with both the maternal and the adolescent roles. Specifically, motherhood comprised a significant position in the lives of Kelly and Danielle, as did adolescence and the ability to attend school, participate in extra-curricular activities and school functions, and maintain peer relationships. Individuals in **category 2** were perceived as being highly committed to adolescence, with little commitment to maternity. These two teens expressed a strong desire to maintain the carefree lives they lived prior to becoming mothers; maternity had little impact on their daily lives or routines. Janice confided, *"I don't think of myself as a mother until somebody brings up the subject like, 'how's your little girl?' or you know, when I go home and see her and then it's like, 'oh yeah, I am a mother.'"* In contrast, young women perceived as deeply committed to the maternal role, with little concern for typical adolescent issues, comprised **category 3**; these women expressed a single, focused commitment to motherhood. Monica explained for instance,

> *"My son is everything to me. There are dances and things like that, and yeah, I missed out on them, but I want to have my son and that's all that matters... I don't think back about not having my son. I don't think 'well, if I didn't have him I would be doing this or that.' Well, I can still do it. It's just going to be harder. I'm trying to find a job, but I want to finish school... I just want to be the best person that I can be."*

The young women in **category 4** were perceived as lacking interest in or having commitment to either maternity or typical adolescent roles. Stephanie and Lucinda expressed little desire to be with their children or friends and also expressed having few educational or occupational goals. Both Stephanie and Lucinda reported always preferring *"...to be alone."*

Grandmother reports confirmed the categorization of each teen; mothers of the teenagers in categories 1 and 3 (those teens expressing strong commitment to maternity) stated that their daughters were highly involved in the rearing of their children and often complemented their daughters' maternal skills and abilities. For instance, when asked what characteristics made her proud of her daughter, Kelly's mother stated,

> *"Well for the last few months it's her being a mother herself. She knows what she's doing, and I never really taught her-- maybe just by seeing me she learned all those things. But, she's a real expert at being a mom."*

Mothers of teenagers in category 2 (those associating with adolescence primarily) described their daughters as more interested in socializing, going out and having fun than in the welfare of their children. Janice's mother remarked, *"I get after her because I don't think she's really close to her baby. She just wants to be with friends, like she's not even a mother; but she wants to continue being a teenager."* Finally, teenagers in category 4 were described by their mothers as having little commitment to or involvement with their children. Stephanie's mother explained, *"I don't think she's a very good mother.... I tell her to change the diaper, feed the baby, wash him, change him, play with him, I [have to] tell her over and over, all the time, everyday."*

Reports from the grandmothers validate the adolescents' reports, and suggest that commitment to the maternal role, in relation to other roles, is not an invisible or subtle process. Rather, the primacy of the maternal role, in a young woman's hierarchy of roles, appears

markedly apparent to significant others who are able to describe and evaluate teenage women as maternal figures.

This investigation sought further to explore societal views regarding the "appropriate" or most desirable age to begin a family. Specifically, we were interested in answering the question: Is teenage parenting regarded as socially approved on the Navajo Reservation? Reports from the teenage mothers, the mothers of the teenagers, and community informants overwhelming agreed that, despite its historical acceptability, adolescent parenting was no longer condoned in the society. With regard to teenage parenting, the Navajo Medicine Man stated, for example, *"Today, it is too early."* And the counselor concurred: *"I strongly believe that our kids, our children, should not have babies."*

Two factors were described as accounting for the shift in attitudes regarding the timing of childbearing. First, as explained by several participants, historically, teenage parenting occurred in the context of marriage, thus validating its acceptability. One stated,

> *"Yeah, [teenage pregnancy was ok] then because they were married. They were married and in that sense it was more stable, they knew that they were gonna be with this man and have children together and make a life. Now, I guess the stability is not there."*

The second factor reported as having a significant impact on community attitudes toward teenage parenting was the recognition of the importance of educational attainment for success and economic self-sufficiency in contemporary society. To illustrate, despite his traditional upbringing, the Medicine Man expressed a strong belief that marriage and parenthood should be postponed, and an education pursued, prior to assuming the roles and responsibilities associated with "adulthood," and namely, childbearing. Others agreed. Six of the grandmothers reported feeling extremely upset upon learning that their teenage daughters had become pregnant. They

frequently reported concern that the pregnancies would restrict their daughters' life options by limiting their ability to complete high school and attend college. One grandmother reported feeling, *"Upset...I was really upset. Mainly because I wanted her to finish her high school. She was only 16, she has a lifetime to [have children]. I was upset because nowadays, you don't have to get pregnant. You can wait."*

Despite its undesirability, having an unplanned child as an adolescent does not necessarily translate into having an unwanted or neglected child. Community informants reported that families often expressed strong disapproval when learning of their teenage daughters' unexpected pregnancies; yet, given a brief amount of time most families accepted the unplanned pregnancies and provided support to their daughters.

Reservation teenage parenting comprises an extremely complex social phenomenon. On the one hand, children, family and life are highly valued within Navajo culture; teenage parenting has historically been accepted and common. However, this is no longer the case, but rates of teenage parenting are exceptionally high on the reservation, compared with the nation in general. When this dilemma was examined in greater depth, a fascinating explanation emerged regarding the blending of the Navajo and Anglo cultures, and the impact of such, on attitudes toward teenage childbearing. One community informant explained,

> *"The reservation is still coming to grips with modern America. We're carrying over traditional activities and trying to blend the good of the Navajo teachings into life in the 20th century. Recently, I heard a Navajo Medicine Man talking about the puberty ceremony, the Kinaalda, and referring to it as the time in which a girl is ready to be married-- and this is when she's twelve....[so you see] the traditional beliefs and values are very confusing for youth and their families..."*

In essence, Navajo culture was described by several informants as in "transition"; Navajo

cultural traditions are increasingly being blended with Western life-styles and norms. This situation creates confusion among young Navajos and their families who, on the one hand, desire a distinct Navajo identity, but on the other hand, lack the skills and abilities necessary for success in the dominant society. For families attempting to teach their children about the traditional Navajo ways, finding a balance between traditionally normative behavior and contemporary expectations involves complex negotiations and sensitivity. In essence, practicing traditional ceremonies and traditions is valuable and necessary for the continuation and maintenance of the unique Navajo identity. However, the messages embedded within many traditional practices, such as the female puberty ceremony, may no longer be relevant in preparing Navajo youth for success in modern society.

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

In this investigation, valuable information regarding Navajo adolescent mothering was revealed through: a) first-hand experience of Navajo adolescent mothers; b) historical accounts, provided by the teenagers' mothers; and c) societal perspectives, as revealed from community informants. Responses from the adolescent mothers, their mothers and the community informants reveal a pattern of forces shaping these young women's commitments, or lack there of, to specific roles and personal identities.

Community norms appear significant in determining maternal self-conceptions among youth; contexts in which adolescent maternity is highly discouraged, will likely result in strong motivation among young women to pursue other roles and aspire to higher educational or occupational goals. In contrast, teenage women who perceive few opportunities (e.g., educational or career related) coupled with the perception that status is achieved through

maternity may see value in motherhood. Though apparently simple, the data reveal a complex web of associations. Specifically, participants explained that: a) there are few educational or economic opportunities for young people on the reservation, b) that maternity is highly valued, however, c) that teenage parenting, though traditionally valued, is not currently condoned. Reservation-residing Navajo, who are simultaneously attempting to forge an integrated collective conscious combining Navajo tradition with modern technology and skill are in a state of cultural transition and ambiguity, as described by several participants.

Practical Implications. The classification framework depicting **commitment to the maternal role** in conjunction with **commitment to the adolescent role** appears applicable to diverse groups of teenage parenting women, and not Navajo teenagers only. The framework of role identification may have implications for understanding youthful parenting and substantially enhancing existing models of teenage parenthood. For instance, cognitive readiness to parent is described by Schellenbach et al. (1992) as comprised of knowledge of child development, knowledge of parenting skill and attitudes toward parenting. Yet, mere knowledge of child development and/or parenting skill may be inconsequential if one is not *motivated to act on* that knowledge; an unlikely situation if individuals perceive maternity as peripheral to their self-definitions or identities.

The data speak to the necessity of addressing social and community factors impacting identity development, particularly during the transition to parenthood. Specifically, maternal self-perceptions may be highly significant for predicting maternal behavior and competence. Adolescent women who identify with the maternal role and perceive that role as valuable, will be more attentive toward their children, committed to the maternal role, and involved as parents,

than those who perceive mothering as secondary or tertiary to their self-concepts. For instance, the health and well-being of the children of teenage mothers reporting minimal commitment to the maternal role *and* who lack informal child-rearing assistance from significant others, may be highly compromised without formal support. Developing the ability to assess young mothers' self-perceptions, in relation to the maternal role, may provide valuable, predictive data regarding those in need of formal intervention services and attention. Likewise, intervention programs addressing the needs of *alternative care givers*, or those who assume child rearing when their teenage daughters do not, may be a highly effective use of limited resources.

TABLE 1: Teenage Mother Participants

Name*	Age	Birth Age**	Partner Status	#Kids	#Kids Desired	Prenatal Care***
Sharron	16	14	Boyfriend	1	2	Yes; 1
Kelly	16	16	Separated	1	3	Yes; 2
Lucinda	16	15	Separated	1	>5	Yes; 3
Monica	17	16	Boyfriend	1; P	a lot	Yes; 2
Maria	19	17	Boyfriend	1	5	Yes; 1
Jamie	17	15	Separated	2	2	Yes; 1
Janice	17	16	Single	1	3	Yes; 2
Danielle	17	16	Boyfriend	1; P	3	Yes; 1

*All names are pseudonyms.
**Age at birth of first child.
***Number indicates trimester when prenatal began.

TABLE 2: Grandmother Participants

Name*	Age	#Kids	#Kids Desired	Age First Married	Age First Child	Education
Carolyn	40	1	5	19	23	11th Grade
Merlinda**	41	3	3	20	20	Some College
Irma	57	8	12	18	20	11th; GED
Evelyn	42	3	2	22	23	RN Degree
Joan	46	6	2	21	21	8th; Training
Paulette***	41	5	7	26	26	Some College
Char	47	4	4	23	24	Some College

*All names are pseudonyms.
**She & her daughter were pregnant at the same time.
***Had a miscarriage in 1993.

TABLE 3: Community Participants

Name*	TITLE	# Years in Community	Ethnicity
Dana	Teacher**	3	White
Mindy	Teacher**	4	White
Arlene	Counselor	Entire Life	Navajo
Tony	Political Leader	Entire Life	Navajo
Avery	Medicine Man	Entire Life	Navajo
Norma	School Nurse	2	White

*All names are pseudonyms.
**Teachers at the alternative high school.

Table 4: Maternal Versus Adolescent Role Identification

TEEN ID:	MATERNAL ID:	
	HIGH	LOW
HIGH	Kelly Danielle #1	Jamie Janice #2
LOW	Monica Maria #3	#4 Sharron Lucinda

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